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ABSTRACT

The New England Consortium criteria of excellence are 26 statements of conditions which describe a quality reading program and which must exist if all children are to learn to read. These statements are grouped under five goal areas, the first of which, community and school climate, is treated in this position paper. The paper supports attainment of the following criteria for this goal area: the whole school atmosphere reflects commitment to the importance and enjoyment of reading; the entire community views reading as an important activity in each individual's life; the entire community actively contributes to and supports the school reading program; and the classroom climate reflects respect and support, by both teacher and pupils, for each individual child's progress in reading. (JM)

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Community and School Climate

A Position Paper

of the
New England Consortium
for the Right to Read

September 1976

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The Curriculum Research and Development Center, Department of Education, University of Rhode Island holds the contract for this project. Fiscal management is under the direction of Dr. Theodore M. Kellogg. Dr. Marion L. McGuire is the coordinator of operations.

Introduction

The New England Consortium Criteria of Excellence are twenty-six statements of conditions that describe a quality reading program. These conditions must exist if all children are to learn to read. The relative quality of a program may be judged by determining the degree to which it meets these standards.

The statements are grouped under five goal areas, as shown below:

The New England Consortium Criteria of Excellence
Goal Areas

*A. Community and School Climate
B. Organizing and Managing a Reading Program
C. Staffing a Reading Program
D. Selecting and Utilizing Materials
E. Fostering Reading Interests

The position taken in this paper supports attainment of the criteria in Goal Area A: Community and School Climate, as listed below:

1. The whole school atmosphere reflects commitment to the importance and enjoyment of reading.
2. The entire community views reading as an important activity in each individual's life.
3. The entire community actively contributes to and supports the school reading program.
4. The classroom climate reflects respect for and support, by both teacher and pupils, of each individual child's progress in reading.

This position paper is provided to assist school personnel in developing a rationale for and in planning programs and activities to meet these criteria.

Essential to successful reading achievement is the creation of a learning environment that supports the reader in the acquisition and application of language skills, and in the establishment of reading as a life-long habit. The school, as an institution, has long assumed the role of reading instructor — building skills, interests, attitudes and tastes in varying measures. Innumerable studies have been conducted to identify the in-school factors affecting the development of good readers. However, learning is not the sole province of the school. Other factors such as the family, peer groups, the general community environment and mass media also influence the learner. If these school and non-school forces can be coordinated and developed to multiply the effects of the school, to extend the supportive climate for learning, the desired result — individuals who can and do read — may be achieved.

This paper, then, addresses the position that *the professional educator must accept the responsibility for developing a supportive climate that maximizes the resources of both the community and the school in a way that insures reading success for every learner.*

In developing the rationale for this position, the role of the school is briefly reviewed. Then, some school and non-school factors that affect the achievement of reading habits and skills are discussed. Finally, suggestions for creating a supportive climate that is based on a community-school partnership are presented.

The Role of the School

Traditionally, society has expected the school to be responsible for educating students in basic literacy skills, imparting knowledge and transmitting culture. In seventeenth century New England, literacy was accepted as the means to eternal salvation. Later, it served to enable millions of immigrants to establish an identity in their new-found world. More recently, literacy has been considered to be a ticket to employment and, indeed, to the good life. With the passage of each successive period, an increasing proportion of our school-age population has come to be schooled, seeking to earn the identity, the ticket. School has played an important role in the lives of our citizenry.

Perhaps the role of the school has not changed; but, as in the past, its ability to guarantee competence and success for every graduate is still far from a reality. The 1971 Harris poll, for example, reports the tragedy: some 19 million Americans over sixteen years of age are functionally illiterate.

Has the school, then, fulfilled society's expectations? Certainly it has succeeded with the vast majority of the population. The United States is, statistically, one of the world's most literate nations. Post-secondary education is no longer the preregative of a selected few. Students are

being prepared to enter a greater variety of careers and life styles than ever before.

Research, however, clearly indicates the school's limits in teaching literacy skills to the total population. Among the important findings are the effects of environment on learning. These include school factors and non-school factors.

School Factors

The Coleman report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, concludes that the most significant determinant of educational success is the socio-economic background of the individual student. It points out that good teachers and sound educational environments are more important to the disadvantaged learner than to those who have access to a multiplicity of resources outside the school. Furthermore, beyond a reasonable base, the socio-economic composition of fellow students, not the materials or the buildings, is the most important in-school resource. Responsive educational models capitalize on these findings. Academic skills and student self-concepts are developed through activities that emphasize the importance of one's background.

There are negative factors to be reckoned with, too. Societal decay, the decline of family-centered life, and the impact of the media indicate some of the environmental conditions that can distract the learner from successful academic achievement. The school must attempt to offset these conditions through quality instruction that systematically provides opportunities to practice skills in both school and non-school settings. If reading is to be both a profitable and pleasurable process, then, school and community must work together to create ideal reading environments. Only through such an enterprise, will the school begin to meet the societal demand of skill, knowledge, and culture for every graduate.

The school itself must accept the major responsibility for creating an environment that supports learning for students of any background. Careful planning on the part of key individuals, especially administrators and teachers, may make the difference between success and failure for some students.

School administrators, for example, might assist the community in assessing local educational needs and expectations. Staff and curriculum development efforts could then be designed to reflect this information and to utilize a variety of existing non-school resources. More opportunities could also be provided for students to practice language skills in areas of interest to them. In addition to the advantages to the learner of an integrated school-community program, the understanding that grows from the interchange between school and community representatives enhances the development of a climate for growth.

Opportunities for working with community representatives may be drawn, also, from efforts to articulate the various administrative units of the school that have a reading component: preschool, adult education, summer school and library programs, as well as the regular school instructional program. A communications mechanism would keep programs in touch, supporting interpersonal exchanges as well as horizontal articulation from one program to another, and fostering the growth of a climate that supports learning. The school administrator is a key to opening the school climate so that staff and community can build the kind of language arts program that will, in time, improve the quality of life for all of its citizens.

Teachers also play a vital role. Indeed, research such as the *First Grade Studies* indicates that teaching excellence is of far greater significance in student achievement than are either materials or grouping formats. Excellent teachers realize the importance of both cognitive and affective factors in teaching. They emphasize the process of selecting and organizing knowledge rather than memorizing it. They provide meaningful situations in which skills are practiced. And, at the same time, they build confidence in the learner, respecting and supporting each individual students' progress.

The impact of teacher influence is undoubtedly heightened by the attachment that young learners develop for adults, who play significant roles in their lives. More and more, as children mature and move away from the family circle, the influence of those outside the family tends to increase. The teacher becomes an important person in the student's daily life. For that reason, it is important to note that students appear to prefer positive, forceful adults who maintain a sense of perspective and a sensitivity to individual needs.

An informal survey of college seniors indicates that *the excellent teacher* has a profound and direct effect not only on learning but also on reading habits and life styles. One student recalled a teacher for whom reading was quite obviously a personally satisfying act. This elderly lady shared her favorite stories with her classes, convincing them that the world beyond their small rural village was an exciting one. That student reports that her love of good literature and of travel can be attributed to that second grade teacher who took the time to teach more than skill.

Within the classroom, the interaction of teacher and learner is probably the most significant factor in student achievement. First, a teacher communicates, either directly or subtlely, an expected achievement level for every individual. Studies, such as the classic *Pygmalion in the Classroom*, indicate that students of varying abilities will achieve only what a teacher expects them to achieve.

Therefore, teachers may lower learning goals for students whose backgrounds and values are unlike their own, thus preventing students from capacity learning. Teachers can inhibit or support students by controlling methods, materials, and grouping practices. The number and kinds of reinforcement activities, as well as the amount of praise that students receive can affect achievement. Excellent teachers use these variables to provide many learning options and to encourage students to expect the maximum of themselves. Additionally, these teachers utilize an instructional process which emphasizes communication among the teachers and the learners. Student and teacher reactions are shared through conversation, art work, dramatics, and other media. Through these activities, student and teacher opinion becomes increasingly valuable.

Finally, superior teachers must provide a variety of formats for skill mastery. Work-like situations that demand problem-solving heighten the integration of knowledge and personal experience. This kind of mastery and student self-concept appear to be related variables. Successful reading experiences tend to encourage students to achieve even higher goals. The able reader, in turn, becomes a confident learner.

Classroom teachers can do several things to create a stimulating reading environment. Beyond the attractive display and use of commercial and student-made materials, teachers must provide reasons for reading. For example, teachers can encourage risk-taking with new material. Students may occasionally sample more difficult materials if exciting options are offered. Students must be encouraged to set their own goals, develop their own ideas, and direct some of the interaction with their peers. They can react creatively if someone has raised thought-provoking questions and will liberally praise students who participate. Finally, and perhaps most important, the classroom teacher can foster a habit of life-long reading by providing the time for every student to become submerged in the language of a favorite book — no questions asked!

Non-school Influences

In addition to the school, other factors such as the family, peer groups, the general community environment and mass media significantly affect the learner. Therefore, education, and even reading instruction, must not be the exclusive domain of the school. Schools have tried a variety of methods to improve instructional environments for students. By coordinating these non-school learning resources, perhaps more students can be reached.

The family. The family is the agency that exerts the earliest, longest and most intimate influence on the child. Studies such as Maine and

Rhode Island assessments, and the Douglas studies of home and school clearly indicate the relationship of parent education and occupation to reading achievement. Blue collar laborers with little formal education often have children who experience reading difficulty. During interviews, these same parents indicated lower aspirations for their children. Their concerns seemed to revolve around the practicality of education as it related to employment rather than to preparation for further study.

Durkin, Coleman and others indicate that cognitive skill development appears to be related to parent-child communication during preschool years. Language ability, a reflection of cognitive maturity, is affected by the amount and quality of adult speech. Children who have been actively engaged in conversation and who have enjoyed the rhythm and language of children's literature seem predisposed to success in initial reading instruction.

Parental attitudes subtlely influence a child's interest in the printed word. Parents who enjoy reading are apt to provide quite times to read; take children to the library; assist them in choosing good books; give books and magazines as gifts and prompt discussion about print and non-print media. Parents who demonstrate their own interest serve as the very best examples for the young. Their fortunate children arrive at school expecting and wanting skill that will enable them to investigate ideas and participate in activities that the adults in their homes enjoy.

The school, then, must strengthen its relationship with the parent population. Most parents are willing to provide opportunities for their children when they feel comfortable with the task. Educators must find ways of communicating with parents who have varied expectations and resources. Educators must be willing to meet parents in their homes and also to provide them with meaningful activities within the school. Parent-inservice education will utilize a variety of formats. Problems of timing for the working parents can be met by television, cassette tapes, and video tapes of parent models reading and talking with children. Parent visitors can share practical ideas with other parents at their convenience. With some effort, parents and teachers together can prevent failure, by channelling a variety of non-school influences to enrich children's backgrounds and increase their desire to read.

Peer groups. During school years, learners are particularly influenced by their peers. Attitudes, behavior patterns, and vocabulary can often be traced to peer-expectations and trends. Adults are often amazed at the readiness of a youngster to adopt the group cult in order to be accepted. The trend appears to strengthen chronologically until it peaks during the teen years. Wise educators will channel some of this energy to affect student learning. If the class leadership can be convinced to

read, the rest may follow. In any case, teachers can help students discover their individual strengths and differences as they relate to the language process. They can also provide a large number of popular paperbacks that appeal to the particular age group with which they are working. Paired learning and cross-age tutoring have proven to be an asset to skill mastery. More students can become involved when assistance with language skills is exchanged for sports skills and hobby information.

Throughout the school experience, students of varying backgrounds should be grouped together. In these situations, research has shown that the able learner continues to achieve while the disadvantaged student usually achieves beyond expectation. Interaction must be emphasized. Sharing language and customs can stimulate additional reading.

General environment. The general economic level as well as the social class status of a community is often found to be a deciding factor in school achievement. From the beginning of time, the village culture and expectations set the tone for the education of its young. Yet, this is still the area of least influence for the educator. One hesitates to be the initiator of the vast social reform necessary to effect a significant change. Yet, some contemporary measures may result in changes for the next generation. Community studies could indicate population, building, transportation, employment, and cultural trends which will affect the direction and life of the community. Educators could assist in community planning, supporting every effort to improve conditions so that reading is a respectable and desirable act. Better quality magazines could be sold in the local drug store; comfortable, accessible libraries could become a building priority; businesses could offer incentive pay for individuals who continue their education.

Indicators of a favorable attitude toward reading will vary according to the resources of the community. But no matter how few or how many, they can be effectively organized to bring about change for the future.

Mass media. With the onset of scientific technology, more information became available to the student in a greater variety of formats. Through television, radio, and many kinds of attractive printed matter, one can keep abreast of the new developments in the products and processes of our culture. The young learner is drawn to the mass media because of the relative ease of absorbing the quantity of information presented. The attractive format of the television already captures the attention of the average young viewer for at least twenty-two hours each week. What is the effect? Kindergarten teachers are reporting the vocabulary and conceptual development of the incoming student to be superior to that of students in earlier years. Educational television and attractive child-

:en's magazines have reinforced some basic skills and primed curiosity.

On the other hand, the recent Maine Assessment indicates that the under-achiever in reading also watched an excessive amount of television when compared to the able reader. Television is a less demanding teacher than the one in the classroom. Response is not required. Visualization skills are not necessary when every detail is supplied in living color. The mass media, when improperly used, demands only a passive attending, and very little critical thought. Teachers and parents must intervene. Assistance in selection, discussion and related reading may help learners to discover the true potential of this resource.

A Community-School Partnership

The school is in a position to give some direction to societal change. Non-school influences must be organized and developed by both the school and the community in order to create a greater accessibility of learning resources. The method of accomplishing such a task is clearly a people-to-people effort. The human resources are the most valuable ones. People generate new ideas, significant research and opportunities. Through a community-school partnership, some of the following suggestions, and perhaps a variety of others, could be utilized to improve learning atmospheres:

1. Preparation for all educators in the sociological aspects of literacy must be provided. Emphasis should be placed on practical strategies for developing and using non-school resources, and for working with community members in both school and non-school settings.

2. Research in the development of strategies for working with parents of school-aged children must be increased. Emphasis should be placed on ways to communicate the importance of raising parent expectation of student achievement.

3. Materials that utilize the communications media, household and neighborhood products and processes, to reinforce literacy skills and to strengthen critical thinking must be developed.

4. A variety of televised and tape-recorded instructional formats that reflect a knowledge of developmental reading instruction should be researched and developed. Emphasis should be placed on more attractive and intellectually stimulating response mechanisms for the learner. Well-known adults, such as sports and political figures, should be used as reading models. A greater variety of current fiction and non-fiction reading materials should be presented.

5. An increased number and coordination of comm_ity-based programs that assist parents and preschoolers in the develo_ment of pre-

reading skills and interests and adults in the mastery of basic literacy skills should be implemented.

6. Methods for increasing two-way community and school planning should be devised. Emphasis must be placed on understanding and utilizing views that reflect a variety of socio-economic and ethnic values.

7. Business, industry and service organizations should be involved in delineating the literacy skills necessary for both successful employment and citizen participation.

8. Computer resource banks should be established by community organizations and businesses so that persons, materials, and learning opportunities may be matched. Matching could include tutor/client pairing for specific skills mastery as well as the organization of individuals and small groups who wish to research a topic of common interest.

9. In-school assistance for students in the areas of both skills mastery and reading interests should be improved. Community residents should be invited to share expertise, hobbies, and time with one or more students. Peer and cross-age student tutors might be used to increase learning opportunities.

10. The availability of appropriate locations for individuals and small groups to question, read, and react must be increased. School and community libraries, banks, store fronts, and restaurants might provide space as well as printed information, audio-visual materials, tools, toys and games.

The community-school partnership suggested in this paper can be a reality. Almost every community provides some opportunities for recreational reading. In some situations, comprehensive literacy programs successfully involve all segments of the population. Solutions to literacy problems are near.

An increased number of community service agencies, concerned with the literacy-related problems of unemployment, mental health, and delinquency might pool resources to hire community literacy specialists. These individuals coordinate with school district personnel in order to provide assistance and opportunities to readers of all ages. In this way, tutoring services, summer reading programs, and home-based instruction can extend the school's developmental reading program.

Such programs might have far-reaching implications. More professional educators could accept the responsibility of initiating the development of reading environments in both the school and the community. A variety of individuals and agencies could be working together for a common goal. Non-school influences such as media, parent and peer-group interaction, and the community at large could be used as learning re-

sources. New opportunities to apply reading skil's in work-related situation could be generated. Reading could become a desirable recreational activity. *A population of skilled, life-long readers is not "pie-in-the-sky."*